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ODUVEK (Since the Beginning): Roma Narratives of Continuous Discrimination and Perspectives on Identity, Marginalization, and Assimilation in Niš, Serbia

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ODUVEK (*Since the Beginning*):
Roma Narratives of Continuous Discrimination and Perspectives on Identity,
Marginalization, and Assimilation in Niš, Serbia

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Hvala Vam puno svima!

¹ I have maintained Serbian diacritics for Serbian names and places throughout the paper. For a guide to pronunciation please refer to Appendix 3.

Abstract

Previous research into Roma memory studies and narratives has found a strong focus on the present and a tendency to ‘obliterate’ the past. This paper explores Roma perceptions of discrimination in Niš, Serbia and its continuity throughout history. Findings suggest that although a majority of participants did recognize a continuity of discrimination, agreeing that Roma had always been discriminated against, when asked about specific time periods in Serbia, such as Yugoslavia and the 1990’s, most interviewees acknowledged these as time periods of equality. The present situation is also discussed in relation to the state of discrimination, the role of the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, and the meaning and prevalence of assimilation in the Roma community. The paper explores the role of a narrative of discrimination and how anomalies can exist within its framework by exploring ideas of collective memory and shared identity.

Introduction

Niš is a moderate-sized city (about 250,000) located in southern Serbia, a three-hour bus ride from the capital city of Belgrade. Across the street from the bus station and under the railroad bridge, you will find yourself in a part of Niš known as Beograd Mala. This place, one of numerous settlements in the city, is populated by Roma, or as they are popularly known in English, Gypsies.² Serbia, a country of about 7 million people,³ has an estimated Roma population of 400,000 to 500,000,⁴ with many of these individuals living in settlements, or *mahalas*.⁵ Many remain segregated and marginalized despite programs focused on fighting discrimination, such as the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*.⁶ The Serb majority remains generally ignorant of Roma outside of antiquated stereotypes.

Objectives and Research Questions

It is the goal of my research to create a better understanding of how Roma themselves perceive the current status of Roma in Serbia and particularly in Niš, how they narrate the history of discrimination against Roma, its continuity, and its presence in Yugoslavia as well as during the wars of the 1990s in the Balkans. Further, I aim to understand how these perspectives on the past may influence future actions, particularly in relation to assimilation. With the focus today on improving the situation of Roma through projects like the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, a multi-organizational initiative aimed at improving the situation of Roma in Europe, it is important to

² Throughout my paper I will use the term 'Roma' to refer to this group due to the sensitive nature of the word 'gypsy.' While some Roma do find the term acceptable and even use it to refer to themselves, others find the term 'gypsy' offensive due to its negative connotations.

³ "Serbia," *CIA- The World Factbook*. Central Intelligence Agency, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook (accessed on 10 November 2011).

⁴ Andrea Čolak, *Abuses of Roma Rights in Serbia* (Belgrade: Minority Rights Center, 2007), p. 7.

⁵ The term *mahala* is a Balkan word for a neighborhood or city sector dating back to Ottoman times.

⁶ Open Society Roma Initiatives, "About," *Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015*, The Decade of Roma Inclusion, <http://romadecade.org> (accessed on 1 December 2011).

understand the ways the Roma community has perceived past and current discrimination in order to best address the problems they face.

The main questions I aimed to address in my research were:

- How do Roma themselves perceive their current situation of marginalization and discrimination?
- Do they see this marginalization as a continuance of a narrative of victimhood or do they see themselves as unconnected to Roma of the distant past?
- How do they talk about and commemorate their history and memories of time periods such as Yugoslavia and the 1990's? Do they think about continuity at all?
- To what extent does the Roma community in Niš possess a "presentist rhetoric" and intentionally "obliterate" parts of the past by not speaking about them, as has been claimed by past research on Roma?⁷
- How does assimilation affect the preservation of memory and identity?
- How does the Roma community perceive assimilation?

Methodology

The population I worked with is a considerably closed and vulnerable community, which introduced unique challenges in gaining trust and making participants comfortable discussing their personal lives and circumstances and thus required special consideration of how to conduct research within this group. To best gain access to the Roma community I was interested in researching, I made contact with a large number of NGOs that focused on Roma issues in Niš and volunteered with a group called RPoint that offers alternative education to Roma children. By interacting within the community and utilizing some connections I had made, I was able to find ordinary people as well as those involved in NGOs who felt comfortable speaking with me. With this approach, I was able to explore a variety of perspectives Roma have on current issues

⁷ Paloma Gay y Blasco, "'We Don't Know Our Descent': How the Gitanos of Jarana Manage the past," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7.4 (2001): p. 631-647.

as well as their varying narratives of the past.

I relied primarily on interviews as the main source of data and utilized a semi-structured interview to allow for the participants to share with me what they viewed as most important. During my time in Niš I completed thirteen of these semi-structured interviews. I conducted six of these interviews with ordinary, non-politically active people and seven interviews with individuals active in the NGO sector. Age varied widely from those as young as twenty to those as old as seventy-two. Eight of these participants were female and five were male. All participation in interviews was entirely voluntary and participants were selected based on their interest in assisting with my research. All interviewees discussed in this paper have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities and therefore privacy.

For all participants I asked broad questions about their narratives of the past twenty years, Yugoslavia, and their present situation to understand how individuals in the community perceive themselves, their own personal pasts, and the shared past of the Roma community.⁸ By interviewing socially and politically active members of the Roma community, I hoped to gain perspectives on how Roma themselves view their agency in Serbia and in Serbian politics and how they thought their issues should be addressed. As representatives of their community, I wanted to hear from these social leaders how they narrate the past of their community as a whole through the volatility of the 1990's and 2000's.

Interviews were conducted both in homes and NGO offices and were recorded for later transcription. In some cases the interviews were conducted in Serbian with the use of translators.

⁸ See Appendix 1 for a list of interview questions.

Positionality

As a non-minority American college student, many of my life experiences are distinct from those of the population I have chosen to study. I have not experienced discrimination like many described in the interviews I conducted. Prior to attending the SIT Balkans program in fall 2011 semester and learning about the region and language, my knowledge of Roma communities and issues was practically non-existent, with my only images of a musical and nomadic group coming from popular culture like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Chocolat*. Part of my intent in this research project was to look past these gross stereotypes, to meet and speak with individuals, and to understand how they viewed themselves and how they thought the world viewed them. Although inexperienced in exploring minority issues, I tried to remain open to understanding as much of their perspectives as possible.

Because I am an American student, many of my participants were curious why I had come to their city and why I was interested in interviewing them. More *surprised* by my identity and interest in the topic than anything else, all participants I approached were happy to speak with me about the issues I was researching.

Literature Review

In my initial exploration of research being done on the topic of Roma studies in the Balkans, I was overwhelmed by the amount of material available. Much has been written on Roma culture, and, due to recent initiatives like the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, much has also been written on efforts in education as well as cases of discrimination. The focus in my literature review was to find previously completed oral histories, research on discrimination and marginalization from the perspective of Roma, and past Roma memory studies.

Numerous studies of oral histories have been done among Roma, addressing many of the themes I was looking to explore. *How We Live(d)*,⁹ a research conducted in Bosnia and Hercegovina in 2000, explores connections between race, class, gender, and violence by way of collecting oral histories from a group of Roma women. These narratives reveal deeply felt discrimination and describe the participants' perceptions of Yugoslavia and the 1990's. The participants displayed high levels of nostalgia for Yugoslavia, but most interviewees were not in the country during the nineties and were unable to discuss their views on the situation of Roma during that time.

An additional source of Roma oral histories in Serbia is *Gypsy Narratives: From Poverty to Culture* by Jelena Čvorović.¹⁰ While the focus of the book (the reproductive strategies of Roma) is quite distant from my own research interests, it is a rich source of not only personal life narratives, but also Roma folklore and stories. These narratives, like those in *How We Live(d)* are concerned with similar themes of Yugonostalgia and perspectives of the nineties along with more personal aspects of each interviewee's life and family.

The issue of discrimination against Roma is the primary focus of two studies, *Roma in Serbia* and *Abuses of Roma Rights in Serbia*,¹¹ which document individual cases of discrimination in a variety of categories including education, healthcare, and employment. They offer a snapshot of the present situation, demonstrating the extent of the current problems. For example, *Roma in Serbia* documents the case of Ljubomir Jovanović, a Roma man who was beaten by police in front of his wife and 2-year-old child because police believed his son had

⁹ *How We Live(d)* (Zenica: Medica Infoteka, 2001).

¹⁰ Čvorović, Jelena, *Gypsy Narratives: from Poverty to Culture* (Belgrade: Ethnographical Institute Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2004).

¹¹ *Roma in Serbia* (Beograd: Humanitarian Law Center, 2003).

stolen a bicycle.¹² *Abuses of Roma Rights in Serbia* documents the publication of the following racist material by the weekly magazine “Naša krmača”: “In honour of Adolf Hitler—dedicated to the man, who was first to realize the problem of Roma overpopulation, who gave a historical example of solving such problems quickly and efficiently...”¹³ These are but two of hundreds of examples collected within a single year and they suggest that discrimination is present in all aspects of society and life.

The issue of social distance is critical in understanding discrimination and marginalization as well. As shown in research by Đorđević, many Serbs remain unwilling to have a Rom as their spouse, coworker, or even a fellow citizen. *Romas & Others, Others & Romas: Social Distance* explores these ideas with several articles looking at social, ethnic, and religious distance towards Roma.¹⁴ Đorđević found that, in 2000, there was a high degree of social exclusion and discriminatory attitudes in Serbia directed at Roma. Only 52.8% of Serbs and Muslims in southwest and southeast Serbia said they would be willing to live in the same neighborhood with a Rom.¹⁵ If only half the population is willing to live in the same area as a Roma individual, this study indicates that the levels of discrimination remain enormously high.

Finally, work in the field of Roma memory studies is growing, with varying debates on the extent to which Roma do or do not commemorate their past and the significance of their social practices with relation to their past. *‘We Don’t Know Our Descent’: How Gitanos of Jarana Manage the Past* by Gay y Blasco explores how the Gitanos of Spain draw their identity from the present and engage in “communal forgetting” as a means of imagined community

¹² Ibid., p. 47.

¹³ Čolak, p. 70.

¹⁴ Dragoljub B. Đorđević, "Social, Ethnic and Religious Distance Towards Roma of Serbia," *Romas & Others, Others & Romas: Social Distance* (Sofia: Institute for Social Values and Structures, 2004), p. 45-53.

¹⁵ Đorđević, p. 50.

construction.¹⁶ In *Remembering Without Commemoration: The Mnemonics and Politics of Holocaust Memories*, Stewart responds to this claim of ‘obliteration’ by arguing, through the case of Hungarian Roma memories of the Holocaust, that the memories are not obliterated, but instead remembered ‘implicitly’ without commemoration. Utilizing the example of amnesiacs, Stewart suggests that memories are recalled implicitly, not accessed declaratively, through “shared activity in the present.”¹⁷ While these studies offer a useful background on memory within the wide field of Roma studies, I was unable to find any past research in English focused on Roma memory specifically in the Balkans.

It is estimated that the first Roma arrived in Europe around 1100 AD, traveling from the northern region of India over the course of 200 to 300 years.¹⁸ When they first appeared in Europe, Roma were mistakenly believed to have originated from Egypt, called the ‘Egyptians’ (later Gypsies), ‘Egipcani,’ ‘Gitanos,’ and ‘Pharaones.’¹⁹ The term used in Serbia and the Balkans, ‘Cigani,’ is believed to have been derived from the Byzantine term ‘Athinganoi,’ a name for a heretical sect.²⁰ Roma were initially viewed as pilgrims (partly due to self-identification as such) and occasionally were assisted by locals in the Middle Ages, but the 16th century in Europe brought about a wave of anti-Gypsy legislation, targeting Roma as well as others who did not fit within the ideals of Christendom.²¹ Banning Roma in Europe from entering churches, marrying certain people, or holding certain occupations became common practice, with the goal of extirpating all Roma from their respective countries of residence.²²

¹⁶ Gay y Blasco, p. 634.

¹⁷ Michael Stewart, "Remembering without Commemoration: The Mnemonics and Politics of Holocaust Memories among European Roma," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10.3 (2004), p. 574.

¹⁸ Čvorović, p.14.

¹⁹ Claude Cahn, *Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality* (New York: International Debate Education Association, 2002), p. 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²² Čvorović, p. 15.

Much of Roma recent history has been marked by discrimination, reaching its height during World War II with the murder of between 300,000 and 600,000 Roma in the Holocaust.²³ In the city where I conducted my research (Niš, Serbia), the Crveni Krst (Red Cross) Concentration camp, a World War II Nazi concentration camp that held some 30,000 prisoners including Roma and Yugoslav Communist party members, still remains as a monument and museum marking the atrocities committed. It is estimated that at least 200 Serbian Roma in the camp were killed.²⁴ With the end of World War II in 1945, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), made up of six socialist republics and two autonomous regions, was created in the Balkans, led by the enigmatic and beloved figure of Josip Broz Tito.

Perceptions of Discrimination

In my initial efforts to explore the perceived continuity of discrimination against Roma, I received a resonant confirmation of its existence. “Da, oduvek” (*Yes, always/from the beginning*) or something similar was by far the most frequent response I received when I asked my participants if Roma had always been discriminated against.²⁵ A few participants followed up their agreement with a reference to the dawn of discrimination with the first Roma migration from India, the believed origin of Roma populations.

In Tito’s Time: Roma Perceptions of Yugoslavia

The situation of ethnic minorities in Tito’s Yugoslavia was markedly better than the situation during World War II or after the country’s collapse. The general ideology and policy of “Brotherhood and Unity” under the socialist system worked to improve access to education,

²³ Ibid., p.12.

²⁴ “Crveni Krst Concentration Camp,” *Information Portal to European Sites of Remembrance*, Information Centre of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, <http://memorialmuseums.org>.

²⁵ 75% of participants answered “yes.” See appendix 2 for a chart of responses.

housing, and employment for Roma and other minorities.²⁶ In fact, in 1981 Roma were given the official status as a nationality, allowing for the maintenance and further fostering of ethnic identity.²⁷

What became evident in speaking with my participants was that the memory of Yugoslavia, and the accompanying Yugonostalgia, was still very real and present for many of them.²⁸ For them, the nostalgia lay not only in the memory of better economic times but also in the memory of greater equality. When asked, “Was the situation of Roma better in Yugoslavia?” the responses varied from the belief that the situation was the same to the more frequent account of a wonderful time when everyone was equal. Many spoke of their families being educated, owning flats, and having money to travel.

What was most striking about these responses were the statements about absolute equality in that time. As previously mentioned, when asked if they believed Roma had always been discriminated against, the majority (75%) answered an unconditional yes. But when I asked about Yugoslavia many interviewees claimed that there was no discrimination under Communism in Yugoslavia. Nadira, a woman in her early twenties currently working for an NGO, claimed, “In that time we were not different. Everyone was equal and the same.”²⁹ Similarly, Lejla, another young Roma woman working for an NGO, asserted that: “in the age of Communism, Roma people had the best condition because they were not discriminated against. They were like all other people.”³⁰ It was as though this period were exempt from the Roma

²⁶ Dena Ringold, *Roma and the Transition in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2000), p. 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁸ The phenomenon of Yugonostalgia is described as an emotional attachment to an idealized memory of aspects of the former Yugoslavia such as its economic security, multiculturalism, customs and traditions, and socialist ideology.

²⁹ Interview with the author, 18 November 2011.

³⁰ Interview with the author, 25 November 2011.

history of persecution, a golden age untouched by discrimination. Life was better for everyone and thus it was better for Roma as well.

While no participant believed that the situation of Roma was worse in Yugoslavia, not all of my participants held an entirely positive image of Yugoslavia. At worst, Farid, a young man in his twenties, described how he perceived the situation in Yugoslavia as the same as the present.³¹ Marija, a middle-aged woman and the leader of an NGO, generally shared a positive memory but acknowledged that “discrimination was present but not as big of an issue as it became during the 1990’s.”³²

The memory of Yugoslavia, or the stories of Yugoslavia they had heard in the case of many of the younger interviewees, offered an image of a better time, not just for Roma and minorities, but for everyone in the region. The presence of Yugonostalgia in the Roma community suggests the wide prevalence of these perspectives. But what is most important in understanding Yugonostalgia is recognizing that “the act of comparing is inherent to nostalgia, since it always forms a reaction to the present state. This clearly shows that nostalgic feelings are never directed to the past alone, but always tell us something about how the status quo is perceived and what is expected of the future.”³³ It is in the current circumstances of discrimination and marginalization facing the Roma community today that longing for Yugoslavia takes on its most powerful significance. While some do recognize that even Yugoslavia was imperfect, identifying a contrasting time that was much better in contrast to the present allows for better hopes for the future. Likewise, it can even lead to the belief that it was a time that cannot be repeated and was therefore just a brief anomaly in the Roma narrative of discrimination.

³¹ Interview with the author, 24 November 2011.

³² Interview with the author, 21 November 2011.

³³ Monika Palmberger, "Nostalgia Matters: Nostalgia for Yugoslavia as Potential Vision for a Better Future," *Sociologija* 50.4 (2008), p. 358.

Roma Communities in the Wars of the 1990's

During the decade of the 1990's and into 2000, the region of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia was marked by extreme violence and war as the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia crumbled. While in Serbia itself there was little direct violence due to the majority of fighting occurring in Croatia, Bosnia, army recruitment and extreme economic hardship suffered under sanctions certainly affected the lives of Serbian citizens. Further, the war in Kosovo and the ensuing NATO bombings in 2000 of major Serbian cities, including Belgrade and Niš, had powerful consequences for Serbians.

When the interviewees were asked about the situation or condition of Roma communities in the 1990s, the most common response was, quite expectedly, that it was a bad time. They mentioned family members recruited to fight in the Serbian army, family killed fleeing Kosovo, or the bombing of Niš by NATO planes.³⁴ But more interesting was how many of them identified the 1990's as *equally* bad for *everyone*. One would assume that the rising nationalism and war of the 1990's would put a quick end to the equality that participants alluded to previously in their recollections of Yugoslavia. What was most surprising in my research was the fact that this was far from what I found.

What many of the interviewees perceived was that everyone in the region felt as equal as they had in Yugoslavia, but in an entirely different way. Where before in Yugoslavia equality had come about because of increased prosperity and recognition of minority rights, in the wars of the 1990's everyone in Serbia was again equal because of universally experienced army recruitment, deficiencies in basic necessities, and seemingly arbitrary bombing by an outside force. As Nadira commented, "when there's a war, a bad situation, everyone is the same. We are

³⁴ During the war in Kosovo in 1999, thousands of Roma fled from Kosovo, perceived as Serb collaborators by the Kosovo Liberation Army. Today many have settled in Serbia.

equal. There is no discrimination. When there's peace is when there's discrimination." When participants were asked if they thought Roma had the same experience as Serbs in Serbia during the 1990's, over half of the participants answered 'yes.' Šaban, a young man working for a youth NGO, answered even more emphatically, "Yes, totally the same."³⁵ But there were others, like Marija, whose opinions and memories of the nineties were far different and spoke of the rise of extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Lejla spoke about Roma in Yugoslavia and how that changed with the nineties, saying, "They could work, study, but now, when Milošević came, everything changed because he, and also some other politicians, had some racist opinions..."³⁶

Many of the participants recalled the difficult financial and economic situation of the 1990's, but it was for this very reason that a small number of interviewees actually viewed the nineties as a better time. Ramadan, a man in his early seventies explained: "the 1990's were better than now. The prices on the market aren't the same, the prices are worse today."³⁷ Halid, a middle-aged Roma man, lamented the difficulties of employment today, saying, "Now it is worse than it was before. Now it is a very, very bad situation trying to find work. It's worse than the nineties for me."³⁸

Perhaps one of the most interesting assertions of the inferiority of the present came from Sevdalija, a Roma woman from the Beograd Mala settlement who, when recalling the period of time in the nineties when her situation was better, nostalgically stated, "While there was Milošević, we say."³⁹ This was eerily reminiscent of the Yugonostalgic "in Tito's time" I had heard many times before. To comprehend how such nostalgia can exist for Milošević's time, it is important

³⁵ Interview with the author, 25 November 2011.

³⁶ Interview with the author, 25 November 2011. Slobodan Milošević was the president of Serbia throughout the wars in the 1990's and their aftermath until he was pushed from office and sent to The Hague to be tried for war crimes.

³⁷ Interview with the author, 24 November 2011.

³⁸ Interview with the author, 24 November 2011.

³⁹ Interview with the author, 18 November 2011.

to look at how the government under Milošević treated the gray economy and how that contrasts with its treatment today.⁴⁰ The participant expressing this nostalgia worked, along with her family, primarily in the gray economy in the nineties and continues in that work today. The imposition of sanctions on Yugoslavia in the 1990's resulted in enormous growth in the gray economy, with some estimations suggesting a growth from 10% of GDP in the early nineties, up to 80% in the later 1990's, and a drop to 30% GDP in the post-Milošević years.⁴¹ The government itself was deeply linked with the gray economy and benefited from imposed "customs" fees and little motivation to control or combat its growth.⁴² Place this in contrast with today where the gray economy is being suppressed and the countries of the Balkans as recently as 2011 have signed an agreement to fight the gray economy and tax evasion.⁴³ For those like Sevda who have relied on the gray economy for survival, a government and political situation that attempts to eliminate that market is certainly perceived as a negative occurrence.

Although unexpected in my research, the wars of the 1990's appeared to many of my participants as another instance of equality, of freedom from discrimination. Despite the narrative of continuous discrimination, here again was another moment in time that offered a contradiction.

Roma in the Present

Perspectives on the current situation range from views that the present is the worst it has ever been to the best it has ever been. These perspectives were strongly correlated with age, with younger participants citing new initiatives and programs working to improve the situation of

⁴⁰ The gray economy refers to economic activities involving legal goods but not taxed or officially counted.

⁴¹ Jens Stilhoff Sørensen, "The Shadow Economy, War and State Building: Social Transformation and Re-stratification in an Illiberal Economy (Serbia and Kosovo)," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 14.3 (2006), p. 326.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁴³ "Balkan Countries Sign Agreement to Fight Grey Economy," *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2011.

Roma, particularly in education, as a reason for optimism. Older participants tended to think back to Yugoslavia and lament the poor economic and political situation today.

The *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, beginning in 2005 and ending in 2015, is a project of European governments aimed at improving the social and socio-economic status of Roma in European countries with high Roma minority populations, including Serbia, Albania, Hungary, Spain, and others.⁴⁴ The program itself is a partnership of numerous NGOs, governments, and Romani civil society working through various projects to speed up the progress of Roma in the areas of education, employment, health, and housing. One of the main parts of the Decade of Roma inclusion is the Roma Education Fund (REF), whose goal is to “close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma.” Some of my participants are beneficiaries of this program, which has allowed them to continue their studies in higher education.

As represented by the slogan, “Nothing About Us Without Us,” one notable aspect of the project is the emphasis it places on the importance of Roma participation and representation in the process. For the *Decade of Roma Inclusion* to be successful, it was evident that Roma would have to be included in the formation and oversight of such a project. To achieve this end, the involvement of Roma representatives and civil society groups was a critical objective.

The opinions of Roma with whom I spoke were quite positive regarding the Roma Decade and the progress it has made in education in particular. But what also was clear was a pessimism and concern about what would happen in 2016 when the decade was over. Milica, a young woman active in an NGO, was happy for the success thus far, but with the reservation that “what was changed during the decade is short term and I don’t think it will last.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See <http://romadecade.org>.

⁴⁵ Interview with the author, 17 November 2011.

A major achievement in the last decade as a result of the Decade of Roma is the documentation of abuses of Roma rights. The Minority Rights Center investigates twenty cases each month of Roma rights abuses, and in 2007 published *Abuses of Roma Rights in Serbia* to further document their work. The cases documented include unlawful treatment by the police, violence committed by private entities, abuses of rights in education (segregation, harassment, physical attacks), abuses of rights in employment, violation of rights in health care, discrimination in public accommodations, abuses of rights in access to public services, and hate speech in media.

The participants in my research had a very wide range of personal experiences of discrimination. While some said they personally did not feel discriminated against, others had experiences that varied from dating issues to trouble finding work to the burning of homes and the death of family members. In the experience of Farid, a young educated Roma man, discrimination had not been a major issue in his life. He even went as far as to say that for Roma who are discriminated against, some of it is not their fault but some of it is.

In the case of Šaban, he had not experienced much personal discrimination except when he was a teenager and dating Serbian girls. It was the parents of these girlfriends who found his Roma ethnicity problematic and would not allow their daughters to date him. While he identified that in the grand scale of things, this was not a huge issue, at the time it was very traumatic for him. But this discrimination by parents certainly points to a larger issue of social distance that will be discussed later in relation to intermarriage between Serbs and Roma.

For Osman, a middle-aged man, the discrimination he has experienced has mainly been towards his daughters who are highly educated and are unable to find work in Serbia, and have had to go to other countries like Sweden to find employment. While he acknowledged that this

inability to find employment in a difficult Serbian economy might be for other reasons than being Roma, he did believe that their ethnicity might have played a role.⁴⁶

The most dramatic and disturbing case of discrimination that was shared was the case of Marijana, a middle-aged woman who fled from Kosovo in 1999 when her family's home was burned. Most of her family was killed when trying to flee from Kosovo on a ship.⁴⁷ She currently lives in Beograd Mala, a Roma settlement where she works in the gray economy at the flea market, faces frequent discrimination, and struggles to make ends meet.

Clearly the present situation of discrimination in Serbia offers a powerful backdrop against which I have asked my participants about the presence of discrimination throughout time. As was mentioned in the previous section on Yugoslavia, it is in the context of the present that one defines the past, whether better, worse, or eternally the same. Asking Roma the same question, "Have Roma always been discriminated against?" in the context of Yugoslavia or the wars of the nineties would most likely have resulted in different responses than those I received conducting interviews in 2011.

Why is There Discrimination?

No one can deny the presence of discrimination against the Roma population in Serbia, but what is more difficult to pinpoint is the exact reason for discrimination against a population that has been in Serbia since Byzantine times.⁴⁸ I endeavored to find out why Roma themselves thought they as a group experienced discrimination to further elucidate their narratives. When I asked my participants why they thought Roma were discriminated against, their answers were as varied as the individuals I was asking. Their responses could be generalized to fit into the

⁴⁶ Interview with the author, 24 November 2011.

⁴⁷ Interview with the author, 18 November 2011.

⁴⁸ Đorđević, p. 7.

following categories: lack of leadership, position as outsiders, society's perceptions of the community, society's systematic necessity of a victim, and Roma refusal to assimilate.

When asked why Roma were discriminated against, Farid replied that it was due to the lack of a leader or representative of Roma interests that resulted in the continued marginalization and discrimination. This was not just a localized problem in Niš, but a shared problem with all of Serbia. As Sonja Licht is quoted in *Roma Religious Culture*, the problem for Roma is their manipulation by ruling parties due to a "lack of homogeneous collectivity, autonomous organization and collective national self-consciousness." Roma in Serbia lack strong political organization because they are not one homogenous group. While there are 18 political parties that claim to represent Roma interests, such as the Roma Party and the Roma Union of Serbia, they do not receive strong support from the majority of Roma, who are often not aware they exist.⁴⁹ There are many groups working to support and advance Roma communities on a local level as well as larger organizations aiming to improve the status of Roma in Serbia and Europe as a whole, but there still remains a lack of a strong leader who can unify Serbian Roma to gain collective rights.

The perception of Roma as outsiders and foreigners in Serbia has persisted throughout their long presence in the region. Nadira commented that the current poor situation of Roma in Serbia stems from the fact that Serbs perceived Roma as people not from their country. But more critical than this perception of Roma as outsiders as a reason for discrimination was the perception of Roma as a subclass of people, distinctly different from and inferior to the Serb majority. Many of the interviewees stated how Serbs viewed all Roma as uneducated, dirty, and poor. These three characteristics, always stated as a group, defined the primary stereotypes that

⁴⁹ *Advancing Education of Roma in Serbia: Country Assessment and the Roma Education Fund's Strategic Directions* (Budapest: Roma Education Fund, 2007), p. 18.

Roma, even those who have gained an education, experience. As Ramzia, a woman in her twenties leading an NGO, shared, “The majority still has one picture of Roma, they’re like this and this, lots of stereotypes. And they don’t let themselves meet someone from that group to break those stereotypes.”⁵⁰ It is the lack of contact and experience between Serbs and Roma that results in such strong stereotypes of the group as whole, a group that in reality is quite varied in socio-economic status and education. It is this ignorance of the group that leads to such stigmatization. As Đorđević notes in *Roma Religious Culture*:

Still, the citizen of Serbia does not know them; he is ignorant of where they are from and when they settled here, where and how they live, how and what god they are praying to, where they hurry and what they do, why they are like “that” and not “this”...From ignorance to prejudice – there is only one step.⁵¹

In my interview with Šaban, he explained how he had himself struggled with the question of why Roma were so discriminated against, uncertain whether Roma were in their situation because of the discrimination or were discriminated against because of the way they were. Indeed, deciphering the precise reason for the levels of discrimination that Roma face in everyday life, in the street, hospital, or job search remains elusive and thus difficult to remediate.

Only one interviewee took a more structural understanding of the discrimination, beyond individual perceptions. To her, the main reason for the discrimination Roma experienced was “because the system must have some enemy, it must have some victim and Roma are always that.” In other words, there will always be a majority and minority and the minority will always suffer at the hands of that majority because there must always be a group that is defined as “the other.” This participant, Marija, a leader of an NGO, was highly critical of the state of government and politics, identifying nationalism and xenophobia as primary problems facing

⁵⁰ Interview with the author, 24 November 2011.

⁵¹ Đorđević, p. 9.

Serbia today. To her, these issues are so entwined with politics that the current political system ensures the continued suffering of a minority group like Roma.

Finally, Lejla identified discrimination of Roma as a result of the traditionalist nature of a group that refuses to assimilate into the majority group. As she shared, “They are traditionalist, maybe they do not want to change their views, their opinion of something and if they try to change it, I think discrimination will be smaller. If they want it.” Lejla perceived that it is through assimilation that discrimination can be reduced and it is the maintenance of traditional Roma views that causes discrimination. While she identified assimilation as something optional, this question of how voluntary it is when the other option is marginalization and discrimination looms large: to segregate or assimilate. I will return to the issue of assimilation later in this paper.

Roma Identity in Niš

Based on this narrative of discrimination that, for some, extended far back in time to the point of the first group of Roma leaving India, I was curious if Roma perceived their identity as something quite localized or rather extending to Roma throughout Serbia and possibly throughout Europe. Of all European Roma groups, those in the Balkans have the greatest variety as well as defined social boundaries.⁵² What I found was that while some participants viewed Roma people as one nation, a great number also believed there was too much variety in the living conditions, education, religion, and cultural situations of Roma to identify with any singular Roma identity. Interestingly, despite the variety of Roma groups in Serbia, none of my participants cited separate Roma groups in Serbia as a reason they did not share an identity.

Those that did say they felt a shared identity with all Roma in Serbia identified three primary reasons: because Roma were one nation, all Roma spoke the same language, and all

⁵² Čvorović, p. 15.

Roma were discriminated against. As Marijana succinctly answered the question, “Mi smo svi jedna nacija (*We are all one nation*).”⁵³ The importance of speaking Romani was brought up many times as the primary reason for a shared identity, with Halid commenting that he identified with all Roma because “they speak the same language as we do here.”⁵⁴

But other participants rejected this idea of a Roma nation or national identity and claimed the only shared identity they felt was a shared marginalization and need to unite as a group to ask for collective rights. Additionally, when participants were asked if all Roma in Serbia had the same experience of discrimination, the majority of participants said yes or placed the number somewhere around ninety percent. This, it appeared, was a uniting element for Roma. Unlike their wealth or education, which varied widely, no Roma, or the vast majority, were free from discrimination. The idea of a shared identity based on perceptions of discrimination is interesting because it suggests that a collective memory of discrimination can effectively help to form an imagined community, a concept that will be discussed later.

For those who recognized a shared identity with Roma in Serbia, I additionally asked them if they felt any shared identity with Roma in Europe. Only one participant said he shared an identity with Roma outside of Serbia. The rest said they did not know anything about Roma there and could not say they shared an identity. This is particularly interesting in relation to the central question of perceived continuous discrimination. While many identified a common thread of discrimination reaching back to India, the interviewees did not recognize a shared identity with those outside of Serbia. Participants were much more likely to admit a lack of spatial knowledge in relation to Roma people and issues than a lack of temporal knowledge.

⁵³ Interview with the author, 18 November 2011.

⁵⁴ Interview with the author, 24 November 2011.

The interviewees who denied feeling a shared identity with all Roma in Serbia identified various reasons why they felt that way. Ramadan acknowledged the variety of settlements and housing, varying levels of education, varying socio-economic status, and different methods of adaptation to everyday life as reasons why he felt he had a distinct identity. Šaban pointed out religion as a divider of Roma, with some being Muslim and others Orthodox, a ratio that has shifted numerous times in Serbian Roma history. But Lejla, a young woman active in an NGO and currently studying economics said “I think like every modern Serbian person. I don’t share interests with all Roma people. Maybe because I want to create my own identity.” Her primary identity was that of a modern Serb because she did not share interests with Roma. Instead of identifying based on ethnicity or the culture of her family, she sought to define herself based on her views, which aligned with those of modern Serbs. This perspective brought to light an aspect of shifting Roma identity that I wanted to explore further: assimilation.

“It’s Easier to Pretend:” Assimilation of Roma in Niš

When asked their perspective on assimilation, the majority of interviewees did not understand the question and required further explanation of what the term meant. It became clearer with each interview that this was not something they spoke of and it was not perceived as a threat to Roma culture. I explained assimilation as a replacement of Roma language, culture, and tradition with a Serbian identity and Serbian language. Assimilation is the adoption of the dominant culture, language, and identity and usually occurs when immigrant groups or individuals arrive in new countries and through the generational process. Assimilation is a form of social adaptation, which also includes segregation and integration. While assimilation represents those Roma who seek to adopt the identity of the majority, segregation is currently the more common form of adaptation in Niš, with an estimated 70% of Roma living in *mahalas*,

many unable to speak Serbian and thus unable to attend school.⁵⁵ While integration is definitely the preferable form of adaptation, the possibility of its success in Serbia today is difficult with high levels of nationalism. I chose to focus on perspectives on assimilation because this offered the greatest insight into how discrimination does not just have the deleterious effect of segregation, but can also result in assimilation and loss of identity.

Roma can hardly be considered new immigrants after nearly a millennium living alongside Serbs. Part of Roma culture is to partially assimilate into the country or city they inhabit, which can be seen in the Roma groups across Europe. In Serbia, Roma speak Serbian and follow the Serbian Orthodox Church or Islam. In Spain, the Gitanos speak Spanish with Romani elements, and are primarily Roman Catholic like the majority of Spaniards.⁵⁶ Clearly, any group that settles in a region is bound to adopt certain aspects of the majority, thus making it difficult to classify what diversions from Roma culture are to be defined as full assimilation.

What appeared as a primary marker of assimilation to my interviewees was the loss of Roma language and the bilingualism the older generations possess. Over half of the younger Roma I spoke with (those under 30) said they did not speak Romani. But when asked if they wished to learn it, they all eagerly said yes and told of how they liked Roma language and culture. Osman, a man in his fifties, lamented the fact that his own children did not speak Romani but could only understand it spoken. What are the views of Roma, both the older and younger generations, when the traditional bilingualism of Romani and Serbian shifts to just Serbian? When Roma traditions are forgotten and no one quite remembers how to enact traditional Roma culture?

⁵⁵ Bogdan Đurović. Interview with the author, 7 December 2011.

⁵⁶ "Spain," *Peoples of Europe* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002), p. 488.

What I wanted to find out was how Roma perceived assimilation, and whether or not they perceived it as a threat to Roma culture and identity. What I found was that my participants viewed assimilation as something that happened mostly to other people and it was entirely a personal choice. To further explore these perspectives I asked them about their own activities and the role of assimilation in being successful in Serbia. When Halid was asked about assimilation, he responded, “I think that it is very bad because the Roma then lose their identity. But it’s a democracy. They have an opportunity to be Roma or whoever they want, but I think it’s very bad.” Similarly, Šaban shared, “I think that it’s on us. If we want to speak only Serbian and not speak Roma language with our family of course we will lose it so it depends on the person. I don’t think the state forces anything. You can choose.” These two participants found assimilation to be a choice that it was up to families or individuals to make.

It was the discussion of the completely optional nature of assimilation that led me to ask, “Is it easier to be successful if you are assimilated?” Not one participant answered the question negatively; all agreed that success was much easier to attain if a Roma individual assimilated into Serbian culture. This mainly stemmed from issues of discrimination and the difficulty getting a job when one openly acknowledges that he is Roma. Šaban answered the question, “Yes. Here, definitely yes. When you say Roma, your first association is dirty and not educated.” As Marija explained most simply:

It’s because they feel it’s easier to pretend they’re something else. Because you know, we live in a very specific time actually, full of nationalism, full of racism and xenophobia and it’s not possible to be different if you want to survive. I can understand people if they want to, if they have white skin or they...it’s easier to pretend they are Serbs here.

So while the majority of interviewees viewed assimilation as an individual choice, they all conceded that success, something that everyone seeks, is easier, and, for some, only possible

with assimilation. If success relies on assimilation, is it really a choice? Does education and improvement come at the cost of assimilation and a loss of culture?

The vast majority of individuals I spoke with identified the importance of maintaining Roma culture and lamented its loss in youth through assimilation. However Šaban viewed assimilation as a potentially positive process for the Roma community. He mentioned Roma traditions that he viewed as dated, such as early marriage and the critical importance of virginity for girls, and hoped that these traditions would be forgotten. For him, assimilation offered an opportunity to lose the parts of Roma culture that he found unnecessary or harmful.

A few people I interviewed brought up the issue of marriage and its role in the maintenance—or loss—of Roma culture. As Osman said, “After marriage they are reconnected to their history and everything that is important in the Roma community.” While in school and attending faculty Roma youth may take on Serb identifiers, only speaking Serbian with friends and only being taught in Serbian. But when they marry, many return to Roma culture, starting with the Roma wedding itself. Getting married in Roma culture is a hugely important event and is a major moment in the continuance of Roma tradition. But marriage can have precisely the opposite effect if Roma choose to marry a Serb or a person not of Roma origin. Ramzia, who spoke of appreciating her cultural identity and making no efforts to assimilate, stated, “If I married a Serbian guy I would accept the culture no problem. I would assimilate.” If Roma culture comes from within homes and begins with marriage, marrying an “outsider” is undoubtedly the most clear-cut route to assimilation. Indeed, a good measure of assimilation of groups is the amount of intermarriage between a group and the majority. In a study by Todorović, Milošević, and Đorđević on the social distance of Roma of south Serbia, they found

that only 21.4% of Roma said that they would not marry a Serb.⁵⁷ But while the majority of Roma would be willing to marry a Serb, it is the social distance of Serbs toward to Roma that decreases the likelihood of this type of assimilation. In a study by Đorđević in 2000, when asked “Would you approve of your daughter, son, sister, brother...getting married to a Roma?” or “Would you yourself get married to a Roma?” 79% of Serbian respondents in Niš selected the answer “Not at all even if he or she is of the same religion or confession.”⁵⁸ While this social distance maintains Roma culture by ensuring Roma marry within their ethnic group, it further reinforces marginalization and isolation of Roma populations.

Commemoration and Talking About the Past

In the work of Gay y Blasco, it was suggested that Roma in Spain possess a presentist rhetoric and communally forget parts of the past by not speaking about them or passing them on to younger generations.⁵⁹ To further explore how Roma remember events and to make sense of discrepancies in a continuous narrative of discrimination, I asked participants how the community remembers and maintains its history. The main responses I received were that these processes were done through commemorative events like St. George’s Day (Đurđevan) and Vasilica, cultural traditions such as weddings, and oral traditions passed on by elderly members of the community.

St. George’s Day, celebrated May 6th each year, is based on the Serbian Orthodox tradition of Slava and celebration of patron saints. It is celebrated by many Roma, both those who identify as Muslim and those who are Orthodox. My participants described this holiday as very much alive today and celebrated as a Roma tradition. Other Roma traditions like weddings

⁵⁷ Đorđević, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Đorđević, p. 260.

⁵⁹ Gay y Blasco, p. 634.

and other important life events were also cited as ways of maintaining culture, as was discussed in the section on assimilation.

Oral history was mentioned as the main way personal family histories were remembered and maintained. In my initial literature review, I came across a quote by a Roma woman interviewed in Bosnia: “He [an elder] always told us about the old days, our roots. And then, like he told me, I told my kids and my kids will tell their kids and that’s how one knows everything, from knee to knee about where we came from.”⁶⁰ I later found this quote to be very representative of the way history was remembered among the people I spoke with. As Marija shared, “We know whose family members were killed during the Second World War and we know, like I know my grandfather was in the pogroms and the exodus from this area to the mountains because they escaped from the Nazis. But you know, it’s oral history.” It was within the family that memories were maintained and passed on. The significance of this is large, as Jelena Čvorović states:

Gypsy culture largely remains in the oral form, and this form of existence determines many of its other characteristics. As it is not fixed in the form of written documents, Gypsy folk culture undergoes continuous change, incorporating the anonymous creative production of numerous individuals. Gypsy oral culture, therefore, is a form of collective creation.

This passage suggests that oral histories result in fluid collective creation of culture. This fluidity allows for the maintenance, or destruction, of certain narratives or pieces of collective memory or identity. In contrast to Gay y Blasco’s claim that parts of the past are obliterated through communally forgetting with only the present holding strong significance for social identity, it appears that the past is remembered and recreated through retellings and tradition and its significance most powerfully influenced by the present situation.

⁶⁰ *How We Live(d)*, p. 73.

As my paper began, the majority of my participants believe that Roma have always been discriminated against. The narrative of discrimination continues back for centuries to the very beginning of Roma as a unique ethnic group. But to even say “continues” is questionable given the answers respondents gave to perceptions of discrimination in Yugoslavia as well as during the wars of the 1990’s. How and why do individuals maintain a narrative despite recent, lived events that fail to fit within its schema?

A primary response to this question is the importance of a narrative or collective memory to a community; it defines the group and its social identity. As a few of my participants noted when discussing their Roma identity, the main, or even only, reason they felt a shared identity was because of the shared discrimination they experienced.

But it was in the recent past where a shared identity could be found with the Serb majority. Both Serbs and Roma experienced equal flourishing under Tito’s Yugoslavia and equal suffering during the 1990’s. What separates Roma in Serbia from the majority is the historical, and now present, experience of discrimination. Perhaps Roma simply perceive the last fifty years as a “blip on the radar” in the centuries of Roma history and discrimination, unwilling to place primary importance on recent history or give it enough significance to change a critical narrative in Roma identity. Despite the variety of educational, socio-economic, and religious situations of individuals, escaping discrimination in its many forms is nearly impossible. It is a unifier and the collective memory of this discrimination is recalled as ‘always’ because it strengthens this shared identity. It creates an imagined community. In her research Gay y Blasco suggested:

It is the sense of moral correspondence between Gitanos that links the person to the imagined community against a social context governed by strong centrifugal forces, by the weakness of structural ties linking unrelated Gitanos, and, most importantly, by the absence of any notion of intra-community coherence, harmony, or solidarity as premises for the

realization of Gypsiness.⁶¹

What I am suggesting, based on my research, is that the economically and socially diverse population of Serbian Roma, while forming some idea of community based on shared traditions such as St. George's Day, construct their strongest sense of unity based on this narrative of discrimination that has always existed. Further, in Gay y Blasco's discussion of perceptions of time, she states, "This homogeneity in the 'before' extends itself to the 'now,' where it is essential in enabling Jarana men and women to come to see themselves as part of 'the Gitano people.'"⁶² Similarly, Roma in Niš preserve the homogeneity of the past by viewing their past as a uniform entity when considering it in relation to discrimination. Of course, perspectives of the past are always colored by the present situation. Maintenance of the discrimination narrative is not difficult today, given current experiences of Roma and the documentation of discrimination where in Yugoslavia this discrimination narrative may have been more difficult to maintain.

Conclusions

What do Roma perceptions of past discrimination tell us about the current situation and future perspectives? If discrimination is assumed as continuous and the recent past is precluded, there is the implicit assumption that it will continue into the future. This research demonstrates that even as much as fifty years of perceived equality, the majority of any participant's lifetime, is not sufficient to overcome a powerful narrative of continuous discrimination. If this is believed to be true, then the only apparent escape from this discrimination is to either leave the country as many have done or to assimilate fully into the culture that refuses to accept Roma. This may perhaps be the negative side of the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, whose goal is to raise the status of Roma. This is not to say the program is not doing great things and of extreme value to the Roma

⁶¹ Gay y Blasco, p. 640.

⁶² Ibid., p. 640.

communities it is assisting. However, what is not fully discussed is how inclusion will affect Roma identity, when inclusion often dictates that Roma are in school with mostly Serbs, are learning primarily or only in Serbian, and are living with mostly Serbs. My research suggests that loss of the Romani language and aspects of Roma culture are occurring and this loss is accepted by Roma who assimilate as an inevitability or unfortunate side effect of success.

The current situation in Serbia represents a clash between national economic downturn followed by growing stratification after years of war and the Decade of Roma Inclusion, a project intended to bring a group traditionally relegated to the lower strata up to a higher level. Within this conflict, various perspectives of Roma can be found. What is most evident is that while some Roma are being pulled up by the program, attending university and finding meaningful work, others are being left behind, pulled down by a structural violence inherent with societal stratification and stuck in the social adaptation of segregation. At the same time, those whose lives are being improved by such programs also are facing a process of assimilation, losing much of their Roma identity in the search for success.

There is no quick or easy solution to the current situation of Roma in Serbia. Current projects offer opportunities not previously available, but they are relatively short term and pose the risk of assimilation and loss of Roma identity. In Serbian Roma's recent history, the existence of equality was only perceived when almost everyone was well off or nearly no one was. While returning to the nineties is unthinkable and returning to "Tito's time" and Yugoslavia is impossible, an improvement in the economic situation in Serbia would, largely, benefit everyone in the country. The role of organizations and programs concerned with Roma issues is to ensure that the stratification that occurs with economic success in capitalist economies does not specifically marginalize Roma populations. But it is their equal

responsibility, along with Roma civil society and individuals, to maintain Roma culture in the face of assimilation to encourage educational programs on Roma language, history, and culture for children and adults. When I asked my participants to name what the most important thing to be done to improve the situation of Roma, for the most part they shared a single answer: education.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation facing my research here was that of time. Thirty days to complete an entire research project on numerous complex issues facing a diverse ethnic group imposes severe limitations on the ability to collect and sufficiently analyze adequate data. While I was able to collect thirteen interviews in a short span of time, given additional time I would search for additional participants with wider experiences and possibly conduct additional interviews with some of the participants.

A secondary limitation was that of language. With only two months' experience with the Serbian language I was able to hold a basic conversation, but was far from being able to confidently discuss complex issues of identity and memory. While many very helpful translators assisted me, I believe that not being able to speak back and forth with many participants limited my ability to collect the best data. Indeed, the best information I received came from those participants who were able to respond in English. Also in relation to language, many written resources that could have been of assistance were only available in Serbian, limiting my access to possibly useful work on the topics I was researching.

An additional limitation was that of access. The majority of the Roma community, specifically the most vulnerable population living in slums and settlements, does not openly share personal stories with outside researchers looking to collect information. This clearly

placed some limitation on the variety of perspectives I was able to gather in my research. Again, additional time to conduct research would allow for development of additional connections and rapport with members of the community. This would allow for richer, more personal, accounts of individual experience and opinion.

Recommendations for Further Study:

The most interesting information I gathered from my research were my participant's perspectives on Yugoslavia and the 1990's in contrast with an over-arching narrative of discrimination. I did not look back further in time, such as Roma persecution during World War II, because of limited personal experiences my participants would have with those events. Certainly further exploration into other events in a timeline of Roma history as well as deeper probing into the perception of the continuity of discrimination could lead to a better understanding of these ideas.

Further, as my research question shifted through the study, I was unable to ask certain questions of every participant that would add to the power of such a study. Asking these three questions and comparing results across a larger study population would yield interesting and more robust results.

- Have Roma always been discriminated against?
- Were Roma discriminated against in Yugoslavia?
- Were Roma discriminated against in the 1990s in Serbia?

While I did ask the first question in my study, the following two questions were not asked, but relevant responses were obtained from other questions during the interview.

Statistics and books that document severe discrimination against Roma are critical and have an important role in fighting discrimination, but very little has been done in the exploration

of how Roma themselves perceive this discrimination. Even if official statistics say discrimination is minimal, if the individuals or community still feel discrimination, there is still a problem. It is difficult to assign statistical significance to the feeling a person has when he walks down the street and the people who see him cross to the other side of the street so as not to get too close.

Understanding how Roma themselves perceive discrimination is critical in overcoming it. Projects like the *Decade of Roma Inclusion* aim to address all forms of marginalization and discrimination that Roma experience and to offer distinct start and stop points. While they are perceived positively in the current situation as a hope for future inclusion, it will be interesting to observe how this decade is remembered by Roma ten years from now when what it has, or has not, accomplished can be evaluated based on what has held and what has collapsed or receded. Will the narrative of continuous discrimination persist or will a proclaimed “decade of inclusion” create enough divergence from past centuries of discrimination to create a new narrative? Or will inclusion result in such powerful assimilation over time that Roma identity itself will be jeopardized and any collective memory or narrative destroyed? Further research is needed that explores these ideas of Roma perceptions and memory.

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Appendix

1. Interview Questions

Background and Discrimination:

1. Have you and your family always lived in Niš?
2. How do you view the current situation of Roma in Niš? In Serbia?
3. Could you speak some about discrimination against Roma in Niš?
4. Do you think Roma have always been discriminated against? If yes, why do you think that is?
5. Do you think all Roma in Serbia have had a similar experience to you? In Europe?
6. What do you think the most important thing is that must be done to improve the situation of Roma in Serbia? Why should it be the first priority? How should it be done?
7. Do you feel a shared identity with all Roma in Serbia? In ex-Yugoslavia? In Europe?
8. How do you view the process of Roma assimilation?

History and Memory

1. Were you/the Roma Community here affected by the wars of the 1990's? In what way?
2. What do you remember about life in the 1990's? Is it different now? In what ways?
3. Do you think you the Roma community had the same experience as Serbs in Serbia during the 1990's?
4. Was the condition/situation of the Roma communities any better in Yugoslavia?
5. Do you speak with your family often about the 1990's and your memories before and after the wars?
6. Do people in your community often tell stories about the past?
7. Do you think assimilation affects the way the Roma community remembers its past, history, culture, and identity?

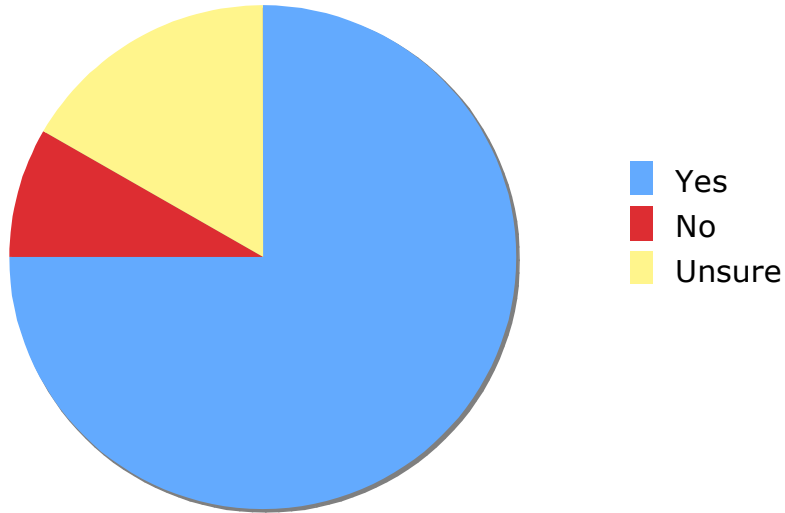
Additional Questions for Politicians, Activists, and NGO Leaders:

1. What made you decide to get involved in politics/activism/NGOs?
2. What do you think about the "Decade of Roma Inclusion?"
3. In what ways does the community here remember and maintain their history? Is there a formal way it is done?

2. Chart of Responses: “Have Roma always been discriminated against?”

Only a direct “yes” or “no” was coded in those categories. Those responses suggesting uncertainty but possibly leaning toward “yes” or “no” were coded as “unsure.”

Have Roma Always Been Discriminated Against?



3. Serbian Alphabet Pronunciation Guide

A	[a]	Car
B	[b]	Big
C	[ts]	Cats
Č	[ch]	Chocolate
Ć	[ty]	Church
D	[d]	Dog
Dž	[g]	Gin
Đ	[dj]	Juice
E	[e]	Bed
F	[f]	Father
G	[g]	Good
H	[h]	Hat
I	[i]	Fit
J	[y]	You
K	[k]	King
L	[l]	Loop
Lj	[ly]	Million
M	[m]	Mother
N	[n]	No
Nj	[ny]	Onion
O	[o]	Bowl
P	[p]	Pan
R	[r]	Berry
S	[s]	Sun
Š	[sh]	Shop
T	[t]	Tone
U	[u]	Food
V	[v]	Victory
Z	[z]	Zero
Ž	[zh]	Pleasure